DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 244 871 SO 015 661

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TITLE Missing the Forest for the Trees: Reconciling History and Anthropology. Draft.
PUB DATE 12 Mar 83
NOTE 19p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Northeastern Anthropological Association (23rd, Syracuse, NY, March 12, 1983).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Anthropology; Definitions; *Educational Needs; Epistemology; Fused Curriculum; Higher Education; *History; Holistic Approach; Intellectual Disciplines; *Interdisciplinary Approach; Objectives; *Unified Studies Curriculum

ABSTRACT

Many anthropologists believe that anthropology stands to gain from devoting greater attention to history and historical questions. A successful synthesis of anthropology and history would not be difficult to achieve for several reasons. First, the two disciplines share fundamentally similar subject matters. Anthropology is the exploration of the entire range of human social and cultural diversity; history is the science of man in time. Second, both disciplines have similar aims and concerns. Both anthropologists and historians are interested in the particular, the general, and the relationship between them. Although their methods reflect different disciplinary training styles and emphases, they both seek to make intelligible the interconnections among events, beliefs, institutions, and patterns of social relationships. Anthropology and history also both insist on viewing people, places, and events in their appropriate temporal and/or sociocultural contexts. Third, the processes by which the anthropologist and historian acquire and make sense of information are analogous, whether they confer with documents or observe and interview informants in their field work. (RM)

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Missing the Forest for the Trees:

Reconciling History and Anthropology

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Twenty-Third Annual Meeting
Northeastern Anthropologogical Association
Syracuse, N.Y.
March 12, 1983

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"...history is about the life of men, and everything which concerns men, as many men as possible---all the men in the world, their life together in society, their work, their struggle for a better life. "

Antonio Gramsci

The issue of anthropology and history is hardly new. American anthropologists of the Boasian school debated this question, as did British structural functionalists and French structuralists. Recent years have witnessed something of a revival of interest in the matter among anthropologists of very different philosophical and ideological orientations. In People of the Mediterranean, for example, British social anthropologist John Davis (1977) asserts the need for a new and deeper integration of historical understanding into ethnographic research on this region. Interestingly, however, he is not sure just what he means by this, or exactly what would be involved. On this side of the Atlantic, Marshall Sahlins (1981) seeks a new synthesis of structralism and history, arguing that structuralists need not continue to work with the conventional Saussurean separation between structure and event.

In spite of their differences, then, many anthropologists today seem to be heading toward the view that the discipline stands to gain from devoting greater attention to history and to historical questions. I am referring especially to those who have gone beyond "history as window dressing" or "history as mere background" arguments, to seriously consider the idea

of a thoroughgoing reconciliation or even outright fusion of the two fields.

I do not propose to offer any explanation for why this revival is now taking place. I plan only to clear away some of the major misconceptions surrounding the question of the connections between, and proper relationship of, anthropology and history. More to the point, I hope to show that these two disciplines share fundamentally similar subject matters, aims and modes of understanding social phenomena, and that a successful synthesis is thus really not all that hard to achieve. Indeed, academic territoriality and the attendant self-protective need of each to exaggerate its own distinctiveness, have done much to keep the two fields apart despite their basic commonalities of vision and method.

On what grounds has history been banished from the halls of anthropology? A common claim is that the two fields have distinctly different subject matters. Anthropology studies pre-literate, small-scale primitive societies and cultures, while history concerns itself with Western societies and cultures or those that leave behind written records. This distinction may have held up in a loose way in the past, but even a casual perusal of both the anthropological and historical literatures shows it no longer to be the case. In fact, were we to maintain this as an ironclad criterion, we would probably have to disavow the majority of what now

passes under the label of social/cultural anthropology, as well as doom ourselves to imminent extinction.

In apparent response to this challenge, some have partially redefined the respective subject matters of each field, while still maintaining a clear distinction between them. Anthropology is recast as the study of any sort of smallscale, face-to-face social structure conceived as a set of interdependent parts, with minimal if any attention to historical or macrostructural considerations (C.f. Brogger 1972). History, in turn, becomes the study of these communities and/or the wider society as they exist in and over time.

For reasons soon to become clear, I reject any such attempt to divorce the study of a set of social relationships from a time dimension. Furthermore, I see nothing in the nature of anthropology as a discipline that intrinsically limits it only to some kinds of societies. Most introductory texts characterize anthropology as the exploration of the entire range of human social and cultural diversity, and I opt for this definition, too. For his part, the eminent French historian Marc Bloch (1953:27) calls history simply "the science of man in time." Strictly speaking, then, the question is whether "the entire range of human social and cultural diversity" includes a temporal dimension. Even Levi-Strauss (1963: 15) claims that anthropology and history study the same thing, although he sees them as looking at

different, if complementary, dimensions of human social existence.

This brings up the second and more complicated matter of whether the two fields actually do differ in their basic aims and concerns, the central issue around which the major debates have so far centered.

In England in the 1930's, Radcliffe-Brown's evaluation of ethnology qua history as purely idiographic, hence unscientific, figured prominently in displacing historical concerns from structural-functional approaches. Radcliffe-Brown was disgusted with both evolutionism and diffusionism, which he regarded as two sides of the same historicist coin. Social anthropology, he argued, should strive to be a science in the mode of natural sciences like physics and chemistry (1958: 16). On the basis of inductive comparisons, it should seek to generate universal, lawlike statements on the structure and function of all human societies and cultures.

This approach would not in principle exclude attention to "diachronics" as well as "synchronics." Indeed, Radcliffe-Brown felt that it would be up to his nascent science of social anthropology to discover the general principles of historical change (53). However, it is far easier to compare social structures as sets of relations existing at one point in time, than to derive these longitudinal regularities. Thus "diachronics" inevitably took a far back seat to "syn-

chronics."

Behind Radcliffe-Brown's claims lie the assumption that history/ethnology is involved primarily in the search for the origins of different customs and traditions; concerned, at base, only with reconstructing a particular sequence of events "for its own sake." Consequently, he judges it to be of little general or generalizing value. And with this proclamation, he insists on the complete separation of social anthropology and ethnology, and thus bequeathes to the former an anti-historical legacy that still survives today.

Unlike Radcliffe-Brown, Levi-Strauss envisions a reciprocal dynamic between history and anthropology. Both, he says, are travelling down the same road in the same direction, and each needs the insights of the other (25). However, he, too, distinguishes the general and the particular, the "timeless" and the "timbound," in characterizing the two fields. For Levi-Strauss, anthropology discovers the unconscious principles that govern social life. The anthropologist studies history not to understand it as such, but to "eliminate, by a kind of backward course, all that... [social phenomena] owe to the historical process and to conscious thought" (23). Data are subjected to a kind of straining process by which all that is 'lexicographical' is filtered out, to leave only the essential, constituent elements. In effect, content is stripped away to reveal underlying structural form.

From this perspective, whatever else their differences, both the father of British structural-functionalism and the grandpère of French structuralism differentiate clearly between "the structural" or "the systemic" and "the historical," and eliminate the latter from their explanatory concerns. Since the structure as system is "constituted by reciprocal contemporaneous relationships," says Sahlins (4), "time is ruled out of the intelligibility." History becomes mere event or epiphenomenon, perceived as unstructured flow, which takes on order and significance only when passed into, or referred to, a pre-existing structure that exists apart from it (C.f. Elias and Scotson 1964: 12).

Maintenance of a sterile dichotomy between structure and event can only doom us to persistent, futile efforts to force time and constitutive human action into some preformed or preformulated set of categories. Time still remains somehow outside of society and culture as constituted, and human actors, in E. P. Thompson's (1978: 194) words, are only "vectors of ulterior structural determinations." Thus Levi-Strauss's curious twisting of Marx's famous statement (1963: 15) that: "Men make their own history, but they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past," into 'Men make their own history, but they do not know that they are making it.'

Marx can hardly be accused of voluntarism, but he clearly did not believe that actors in society are merely enacting a script of which they are totally unaware. He did believe that human relationships in society are constituted in and over time; and that the weight of the past is not easily flung off, but forms the basis for a dialectical engagement with the present and the future.

As far as Radcliffe-Brown's distinction between social anthropology and history is concerned, as early as 1961 no less a social anthropological luminary than E.E. Evans-Pritchard (1962: 174) noted that few anthropologists really saw themselves any more as generators of social laws. Most had not abandoned a broad, comparative perspective; but rather than producing universal, inductive generalizations, they were far more likely to be seeking the general in the particulars of the specific societies and cultures being studied.

And so, he observed, do historians "see the general in the particular" (174). For Radcliffe-Brown's conception only holds up if history is seen as "merely a record of a succession of unique events" (174), and if historians are thus denied any claims to providing systematic explanations of social life or to creating and using generalizations. But numerous reputable historians say that they do just that (Bloch; Gottshalk 1950). Marc Bloch (194),

example, baldly asserts that: "History seeks for causal wave-trains," although it is "not afraid to find them multiple." Gottshalk (263) evaluates the different ways in which historians use generalizations, as does Evans-Pritchard (194), who points out, for example, that the notion of a class of events is a general category often employed in historical writing.

The crux of the matter, as Evans-Pritchard so rightly put it (175) is that both anthropologists and historians are interested in the particular, the general and the relation between them. They may go about their searches in different ways that reflect different disciplinary training styles and emphases. Still, both seek to make intelligible the interconnections among events, beliefs, institutions and patterns of social relationship.

In fact, I would argue that anthropology and history actually have more in common than do any other two disciplines that study social life. Both are based upon a wholistic conception of man as a social being. And whether or not any particular historical or ethnographic study examines all aspects of a given milieu, it usually proceeds from an implicit model of the whole and its inter-connections. Thus, we would find it surprising if an economic anthropologist or an economic historian were to do a piece of research on markets without somehow taking into account their relationship to other features of the society and culture in question.

However, an economist probably would (and some would say, should) do so.

Anthropology and history also both insist on viewing people, places and events in their appropriate temporal and/or sociocultural contexts. History, says Bloch (35) is not about man in the abstract, but men in particular climates of time: "an historical phenomenon can never be understood apart from its moment in time," that being "the very plasma in which events are immersed and the field within which they become intelligible" (27-28). Anthropologists, too, routinely refer to the need to understand cultural beliefs and practices with reference to their place in the overall cultural scheme. In addition, both disciplines put especially heavy emphasis on the ability to penetrate into social worlds that are either culturally or temporally removed from that of the anthropologist or historian.

The list could continue, but by now the point should be clear: the fundamental aims and perspectives of the two fields have a great number of similarities. What, then, of the epistemological and methodological divide so often assumed to separate them? Anthropologists, of course, usually do field work. The theory has it that they immerse themselves in another culture and acquire firsthand experience of it at many levels. Historians, by contrast, consult written documents left by past generations. At their extremes, the images of the khaki-clad pith-helmeted anthropologist taking down his informant's

answers on a scratchpad, and the pipe-smoking archive-bound historian in tweeds dusting off his precious volumes, could not be more disparate. These images are also terribly misleading.

Few would deny that there is a special quality to field work that comes from direct interaction with members of another culture. It is hardly possible to engage in active dialogue with a document, as it is with a "real live" informant. (Although some historians do refer to a process of making their documents speak to them.) However, the mystique of field work, as well as its symbolic importance to the anthropological novice as a kind of initiatory baptism by fire, acts also to obscure its problems, and to exaggerate its specialness.

As was seen, anthropologists and historians both seek to uncover or to reconstruct patterns of inter-connection among economic, social, political and cultural phenomena in a given setting. They might ask what lay behind an outbreak of violence at a certain time and place, or seek to establish the inter-relation of religion and social class in a particular milieu. In either case, the specific aspects that will be of greatest interest will depend on the nature of the questions being posed, and the conceptual and theoretical scheme (whether implicit or explicit) that is used. But whether they confer with documents or observe and interview informants, they will go through an analagous process of evaluation and interpretation of the information in order

to answer these questions.

At the most obvious level, both must critically appraise the veracity of the information. While it might sting our ethnographic egos to admit it, informants can and do lie, or merely mislead by conveying inaccurate or distorted accounts. We are not always in a position to know with perfect assurance when this is happening. Surely, ethnographers have ways of detecting this and of checking the account of one person against that of another. But none of these processes is even close to foolproof, and careful cross-checking is not always possible.

Alluding to the "fallacy of the infallibility" of first-hand information, Marc Bloch (49-50) points out that most of what we learn of any social milieu, living or dead, is actually secondhand; since one individual can only perceive "a tiny patch of the vast tapestry." We ask informants about things we are not able to directly observe, and even if we check their response, we can not attest for certain to its factual accuracy. Here it might be added that, because their sources are defunct, historians have in fact developed fairly clear standards of internal and external critcism for assessing the authenticity and credibility of documents. We, as anthropologists, are rarely so carefulwhen it comes to field data, most likely in the mistaken assumption that this is guaranteed by the simple fact of first-hand collection.

Of course, it can easily be argued that the reasons why

people lie, the things they lie about and the times when they do so are in themselves relevant to the anthropologist. This is only the most extreme illustration of a far more generalized process of evaluating what people say and do with reference to the position that they occupy in a given constellation of social relationships. Even the most sincere informant can only be telling his or her own version of the truth; always influenced by where he or she stands with regard to the matter at hand, what place he or she occupies in the community, how acute an observer he or she is, and so on. Any ethnographer knows of the need to subject all the materials gathered in the field to this sort of critical scrutiny. In a sense, it means simultaneously believing everything and nothing.

Historians, I suggest, do the same thing in evaluating a written source. When examining a particular document, the historian is likely to ask about the known or probable characteristics of the author(s) and the likely set of circumstances in which it was drawn up. He or she is also bound to consider any extenuating factors or constraints that might have conceivably affected its truthfulness or the presentation of the material. Of course, this necessarily lacks the value of first-hand knowledge of the person, and direct experience of the context in which the document was produced, at times available to the ethnographer. Still, to the extent that answers to these questions can be had or intelligently inferred, the documents can be handled much as

an informant's remarks and observations.

I came to this realization in trying to assimilate the large quantity of documentary evidence I had collected in various libraries and archives during my field stay in southern Italy. At first they seemed opaque. As I came to appreciate this parallel with field sources, however, I was able to make sense of these documents and use them effectively. For example, British lyricist Edward Lear's comments on local elite families are neither rejected out of hand, nor taken at face value. They are instead evaluated as the statements of a well-to-do British gentleman engaged in a scenery-painting expedition, who regarded local people and customs mainly as curiosities. The same basic principle holds for other written sources.

Not only do they engage in parallel forms of evaluation and interpretation of sources, but much more fundamentally, anthropology and history also make sense of their materials in similar fashion. Their epistemological premises are very close. This assertion can obviously be questioned on the grounds that anthropologists, after all, do field work, and thus know their milieu firsthand. Historians, quite clearly, can not.

What exactly does it mean to "be there"? Does being there = knowing? What an ethnographer gains from firsthand exposure, apart from the data themselves, it seems to me, boils down to an emerging sense of the overall culture and how it fits or does not fit together. This conception then

guides ~~to~~ assimilation of information, and can, in turn, be refined ~~to~~ developed by the acquisition of new information. The process entails a dialectical movement between conception and data, which is why after six months an ethnographer can often make sense of what seemed unintelligible during the first month of field work.

Historians work toward something very similar to this conception of the whole by immersing themselves in the language, literature and mores of another time and place. By using sensibilities very close to those that anthropologists bring to bear during field work, they exercise the historical imagination and try to get as close as possible to the milieu in question (Gottshalk:47-50). What was rural society like in France in the fourteenth century? What would it have been like to be a member of the Chinese gentry class in 1700? And like the anthropologist in the field, in making sense of any new document, they will exploit all the knowledge they already possess about the witness and period (Gottshalk: 134), seeking at once to gather more information and to deepen and possibly even alter their conception of the milieu.

I am suggesting, in effect, that the processes by which anthropologists and historians acquire and make sense of information are analogous, if not identical. Because they are dialectical and not linear, it is impossible to specify an exact set of rules and regulations to follow in acquiring the "historical" or the "anthropological" imagination (C.f. Gottshalk: 50).

For it is far more a matter of developing a certain sensibility than of mastering a set of techniques, as anyone who has tried to teach these methods will attest.

Above I have sought to show how very close anthropology and history really are, or how close they could be were we to dispense with false polarities between "structure" and "event" and "science versus history," and relinquish some of our more mystified notions of field work. In the long run, academic specialization in the social sciences has not worked to further our understanding of human society, but to subject it to a process of compartmentalization analagous to the alienated division of labor. As the bearers of wholistic visions, it is thus especially important that historians and anthropologists work together toward an integrated conception of man in society and and time---one that resemble's Gramsci"s view of what history is all about. Ultimately it does not matter whether anthropology becomes history, or history anthropology, so long as this takes place.

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